The Real Reason for Becoming a Monk or Nun

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NEGROES have more spiritual penetration than white people. This is illustrated by a story which was told me the other day concerning a young man about to prepare for Holy Orders.

His white friends congratulated him for a host of superficial reasons; as, for example, the opportunity which it would give him to continue his studies or to be surrounded with the beautiful things which he loves.

The old colored cook went deeper. She asked if he had had a call from Almighty God.

Much has been written about the history, the beauty, the usefulness of the Religious Life and the need of recruits for communities both of men and of women. If God will give me the special grace accorded to Maria, the cook, I

shall go to the core of the matter and point out the innermost reason for wanting to be a religious.

We might begin, however, with some secondary reasons.

1. Deep in our hearts we all have a craving for perfection. Also, deep in our hearts, we know how far we fall short of it. We hope, with good reason, that we shall be helped to control our sloth and our self-indulgence by submitting ourselves to the discipline of the Religious Life. We hope to be guided by the spiritual experience of the ages in the way of prayer and perfection.

2. We hope, too, that our lives will be made more useful. We know that God does not require us to bring extraordinary talents, which most of us do not possess. It is enough that we give Him our poor, weak selves. He will bless them and break them as He did with the loaves and fishes. Then He in His power can use them to feed thousands. To anyone who knows the history of the Religious Life in our own Communion it is extraordinary to what fruitful and manifold purpose God has used the very small groups

of mediocre men and women who constitute our orders. Truly, He has "chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty." I suppose one could say that a given individual achieves three or four fold the spiritual results for souls through the training, the ordering of time and energy, the teamwork of a religious community.

3. One of the greatest blessings of a religious, whether or not he sought it consciously, is his membership in a religious family. The joy, the comfort, the blessed security of it unfold themselves more and more to him as years roll on.

"It is not good for man to live alone." Men and women need this intimate environment of family life which the great majority of them find in their natural homes. But the ties of the Precious Blood of Jesus which bind together the members of a religious community, or family, are closer even than the natural "blood-ties" between kinsmen.

To have passed through the same novitiate, to have taken the same vows, to have knelt side by side at the Altar countless times to receive our Communions, to

wear the same habits, to live by the same Rule—yes, and to share the same jokes and face the same problems and know the same trivial (but greatly beloved) idiosyncrasies of each of our brethren in the order—such things weave us together to form a close and deeply cherished pattern in the garment of Christ.

4. We come closer to the core of the matter when we speak of the liturgical worship of a religious community. For worship is the most essential part of our work. There is the daily offering of the great Sacrifice of the Mass, to the glory of God and on behalf of the souls of men. There is, also, the rendering of the Office.

Night and day, all through the centuries, choirs of monks and nuns have sung praise to Almighty God. It is thrilling to think of the torch passed on from one generation to another. In an age which so largely forgets God, it is a special privilege to be allowed to share in the steady round of adoration.

I have given four reasons for being a monk or nun. I might give many others. But let us get on, now, to the real task

in hand—to imitate Maria.

The real reason, the only true sufficient reason, for becoming a monk is to be crucified. That is what happens. The Religious Life is a contrivance of Divine ingenuity whereby a soul may be crucified with Christ. The vows are the three nails with which we are nailed to the Cross. Incidentally, we may spend many years in the Religious Life before the full significance and the dreadful pain of those nails is brought home to us.

Before and after we take our vows, we are urged to a "steady living of the crucified life"; which means, at its deepest level, that moment by moment we are to recognize and joyfully accept all that God wills for us—all that He reveals as our duty—by outward circumstances, inward leading, the minutest details of our Rule or the directions of our superiors.

One must admit that one's community is faithful about reminding us of the reason for our coming. It has erected a monument to it in every room. From chapel to kitchen, from attic to cellar, there is scarcely a place in the house without its crucifix. In the library, a

large one hangs on the wall. In the refectory, one broods over us. As we pass through the halls and up or down the stairs, the blessed reminder meets our eyes. As one sits in his cell to study, work or pray, the crucifix on the wall is its only adornment. "God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world."

That all sounds grim. But it is true. Do not attempt to become a monk or nun unless you intend from the bottom of your heart to surrender yourself wholly to Jesus, to hang with Him on His Cross in perfect submission to the will of the Father and on behalf of the souls of men.

Still, there is a beautiful secret which I have saved to the last and which makes all the difference in the world. It does away with the grimness and renders the Religious Life the dearest, sweetest, blessedest thing in the world. The Religious Life is a Love-Affair.

Why do you suppose God made people by sexes, in the forms of men and women? He could have contrived some quite different way, I imagine, to per-

petuate the species. For that matter, he could have created us full-grown.

All through the Bible there runs a delicate thread which suggests that God made human marriage as a vivid, alluring picture of the Marriage of the Lamb. Heaven is the great Wedding-Feast. Our Blessed Lord God is the Bridegroom. Each soul that is willing to surrender itself to Him is the bride.

Now get this straight. It is not human marriage that is the reality and Heaven the picture. It is just the other way round. Heaven is the great, the eternal reality wherein God, who is Pure spirit, unites Himself with the spirits of the blessed. Human marriage at its loveliest and best is but the picture.

All souls are invited to become the brides of Christ. But the religious does not wait for the life beyond the grave. He steals a march on the others.

Earlier in this article I gave several reasons for becoming a monk or nun. Did you notice that I omitted that which many folk outside the Religious Life imagine to be the true one? I have the feeling that most people think that monks

or nuns were "disappointed in love."

Perhaps some of them were. God has many means of drawing souls to Himself. All I can say is that, though I have known a great number of monks and nuns very intimately, I never have happened to strike one who came to the cloister because he or she had been disappointed in love.

On the other hand, I have known very many—please God, it is true of them all—who were successful in love beyond all dreams or imagining. For they have heard in their hearts the whispering of the Perfect Lover. And it has been their deepest passion and their joy to surrender themselves to Him unto death, even the death of the Cross.

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